43 / The Uncanny Pleasures of the Urban Spectacle: *Marvellous Melbourne - Queen City of the South* (1910)

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Dreaming the City

On 29 January 1911, the Perth *Sunday Times* featured a story entitled 'The Vision' about a man from Melbourne who reportedly had a peculiar experience while attending the King's Picture Garden in Perth. The man, recently arrived from Melbourne to acquire some land, woke up during the screening of *Marvellous Melbourne: Queen City of the South*, the core of which is a spectacular opening sequence featuring two 'phantom rides' shot from the front of a cable tram. When the man opened his eyes, after being awoken by a friend during this first film of the evening programme after the interval, he firmly believed he was elsewhere:

"*… he was apparently in Melbourne, running along on a St. Kilda road tram. The illusion was perfect, the clanging of the*

bells and the rapidly-approaching city making even the wide awake audience feel as they were adjacent to the banks of the Yarra."[1] Convinced that he was in Melbourne itself, continues the article, the man told his friend that he just had a bad dream: he had dreamed they were in Perth. But now that he was awake he was happy to find himself in Melbourne (as the view of St. Kilda Road and the approaching Princes Bridge was confirming for him). So entranced was he by his vision that it reportedly took "*seven yells of the peanuts boy*" to persuade him that Western Australia was an "*incontrovertible reality*".

This essay argues that the spectacular opening sequence of *Marvellous Melbourne* can be productively read as the cinematic manifestation of an urban uncanny. It is uncanny in the sense of its perceptive doubling of reality as implied in the story of 'The Vision'. More broadly this story also alludes to the possibility of a shift in realist representation from a cinema of external attraction to a cinema based on the 'inner' experience of travel. As for the uncanny feeling of the double, "*the whole thing*", writes Freud, "*is purely an affair of 'reality-testing', a question of the material reality of the phenomena.*"[2] At the same time this film is also instructive as a cultural artefact produced, exhibited and experienced at a time when quite different representations of Melbourne (in terms of its urban design) were competing with each other and/or being reconciled.

Melbourne and the City Travelogue

Marvellous Melbourne - Queen City of the South is the first documented city-film about Melbourne. The thousand-foot travelogue, produced by British-Canadian Cozens Spencer and filmed by Tasmanian Ernst Higgins, was released at the

Olympia in Melbourne on Tuesday 22 November 1910.[3] Aimed at the then profitable market for city travelogues, the film was composed of a series of spectacular views constructing Melbourne as a modern city rich in life and movement.

The opening day programme initially announced that the film contained a "*Panorama of Melbourne*" followed by a view of "*Magnificent Boulevards*" and by the display of the main buildings and leisure venues. On the following Saturday, in an explicit acknowledgement of the popularity of the 'phantom ride' views, the film was promoted as "*Melbourne in Motion*". When it opened in 1910 at Spencer Wirth's Olympia, *Marvellous Melbourne* replaced a programme of travelogues called 'Tours of the World' which had been popular in Melbourne since 1907.

This amounted to not just a change of programme but implied a development based on a shared aesthetic within the travelogue genre. Both programmes involved 'phantom ride' sequences. The 'phantom ride' was a type of shot popular in early cinema created by placing the camera in front of a moving vehicle, initially a train. It was one of the first types of shot to provide the spectator with a masterly, subjective point-of-view and offered a quintessential experience of the industrial age, linking together the movement of the train and that of cinema.[4]

After the fading of their early popularity, 'phantom ride' sequences enjoyed a renaissance after 1904 thanks to 'Hale's Tours of the World'. The 'Tours' represented a new type of film exhibition based on a mechanical invention which provided the realistic illusion of actually traveling on a tram or on a train carriage. It was presented in St. Louis in 1904 by

George Hale, patented in 1905 in the United States as 'Pleasure Railways', and soon commercialised as 'Hale's Tours of the World'.[5] 'Hale's Tours' arrived in the UK 1906 and in Australia the following year (first Sydney, then Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth) under the shortened names 'Tours of the World' and 'The World's Touring Car'.

The Stationary Journey

This form of entertainment combined a small cinema of 66-70 seats in the shape of train carriage (in Australia, a Pullman car) with a back-projected programme of travelogues, consisting of phantom rides shot in spectacular destinations. The carriage had a patented mechanism simulating the shaky movement of the real vehicle. The locked view and the insistent repetition of the visual pattern created a hypnotic effect, enhancing the reality of the experience. Given the illusionistic nature of the setting, the filmed phantom ride worked as a visual decoy.

It captured and attracted the attention of the eye while the other senses were distracted by the physical experience of the carriage: the voice of the ticket-collector/guide, the wind blowing, the sounds of bells and of the track. The settings therefore were artificial but the experience was quite real, conflating imagination and reality. It is apt to propose, with Rabinovitz, that 'Hale's Tours' was "*more than movies; it was also about the physical experience of motion itself, an incorporation of the cinematic into perceptual experience that located meaning in the body of the spectator.*"[6]

Building on this tradition, the tram sequence in *Marvellous Melbourne* was aimed at conveying an enhanced experience of the city. The edited footage helped to produce an

imagined sense of continuity and density in relation the urban space it represented, something which was perhaps lacking and less exciting in terms of the daily reality of encounters with this city environment. The impression was popular enough to be echoed in the advertising by the subtitle "*A Sight that Will Fire Your Patriotism*" (supplementing "*Melbourne in Motion*"), thus suggesting a further important theme to do with national identity within the spectacle of movement.

To achieve the 'larger than life' effect the film translated the illusionistic strategies of the phantom ride to the large screen. In the sequence of *Marvellous Melbourn*e only some of the perceptual experiences of the 'Tours of the world' were still at work. While the physical experience of movement conveyed by the carriage of the early 'Tours' was gone, the pattern of the visual sequence and the aural effects were transformed into a spectacle that inherited the experience of the 'Tours' and proposed a visual illusion of subjective motion. Key ingredients such as sound and the projected image were maintained; the moving carriage had to be imagined by the spectator.

Movement became the key strategy of the narrative, and it was a movement enhanced by rough, jump-cut editing. The tram footage was compressed to omit most of the slowing down and stopping of the tram. The aim was to help the shots maintain a constant speed, to provide a seamless illusion of repeated movement. And the fixity and the continuity of the movement was indeed unreal: for Bruno "*the camera becomes the vehicle, that is becomes, in a literal sense, a spectatorial means of transportation*".[7] In *Marvellous Melbourne,* however, the fixity of the camera's gaze takes the process a step further. Not only are the

spectators transported, but they also share the experience of the vehicle. Turned into a travelling tram, the camera at the same time mimics the mechanical fixity of the machine.

Mechanical Subjectivity and the Uncanny

The phantom ride sequence is introduced by a bird's eye panorama over the centre of colonial Melbourne shot from the top of the fire-brigade tower. The panorama is followed by a fifty-second view of trains arriving at and leaving Richmond Station. The dance of puffing trains introducing the tram phantom ride moves the spectator from the southern St. Kilda Road towards the city, mimicking the experience of accessing the city from the sea. The shot produces one of the most spectacular and revealing introductions to the urban space of Melbourne to have appeared on screen as from the wide, deserted St. Kilda road, still without trees or buildings, the viewer slowly approaches the skyline of the metropolis.

The size of the buildings in the city centre grows by the second while the camera approaches the grid along the boulevard-to-be. The 'camera-tram' crosses the main Princes Bridge and enters the city grid, proceeding in between the tall buildings of central Swanston Street and, then along Collins, Melbourne's most prestigious street. The fast and improvised visual 'becoming' of the city, the sudden switch of density from empty urban space to a crowded main street, reveals the speed of the city's growth.

The sequence is studded with descriptive titles, its rhythm differed by a series of static views of institutional monuments: town hall, post office, parliament, and law courts. What appears unfamiliar and hypnotic about this

sequence, even today, is the experience of being in motion, not just as passengers but as a subjective mechanical unit. And the uncanny emotion arises from the excess of realism, which enhances and de-familiarises the daily perception of the city.

In the final part of his essay on the uncanny Freud pays considerable attention to the matter of setting limits on his definition of the phenomenon: "*Not everything that fulfils this condition - not everything that recalls repressed desires and surmounted modes of thinking belonging to the prehistory of the individual and of the race - is on that account uncanny*".[8] The experience of being *in* the shot, not just looking at it and being attracted to it, connects with the essential, almost banal, element Freud was after.

In the world of representation, the uncanny feeling is most likely to occur when the realist setting effaces "*the distinction between imagination and reality*". This mainly occurs when something imaginary is presented in a realist representation "*such as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality*". As here, for example, where the imaginary experience of being riding on a tram is duplicated, made possible through a screened virtual reality. But to be truly uncanny this feeling has to be perceived as subjective. Many characters and situations may be uncanny on the page, but the lack of empathy with the character, adds Freud, prevents the feeling from being uncanny at all.

The mechanical subjectivity of the shot, looking at the city with the fixity of a tram, triggers a mechanism of empathy with the industrial identity of the city. The bodily perception of being turned into a machine running on a track along the city grid also evokes a more traditional uncanny feeling of

being non-human. The position of the camera, at one with the tram, forces upon the gaze of the spectator the uni-punctual perspective of the industrial object: the subjective gaze of a machine, which can only move forwards or backwards. The eyes of the spectator are, in a sense, disembodied and have the feeling of responding to a mechanical input, of becoming a visual function of the city's tram network.

The City that Never Was

Marvellous Melbourne performed not just the role of a contemporary city-film but also functioned as a kind of cultural time machine in its appeal to older mythologies of the city. It celebrated the industrial identity of the temporary new capital of Australia and it re-connected with the nickname 'Marvellous' bestowed upon Melbourne in the 1880s in its colonial and post-Gold Rush heyday. The boom was followed by a financial crisis and depression in the 1890s, then by a gradual recovery, eventually giving rise to a city which was more conservative and English in character, more sympathetic to the new 'Garden City' movement and less keen on its past industrial identity.[9]

Marvellous Melbourne worked against that trend by re-organising the city image around the narrative of the modern industrial centre. From the title the travelogue linked the present Melbourne with its 'marvellous' past, giving a novel reading of the city's urban identity during its transformation from Victorian metropolis to provincial business town. In a succession of quick city views, less than a minute long, the film proposes a structured and densely populated urban pattern.

The views are based on a centrifugal movement from the centre (monuments, stations, trains and trams), to the periphery (with leisure sites involving football, the agricultural showground, and a parade on the Yarra river). We end at the shipyard in the bay, and the beaches. Transport, city life, colonial architecture and natural resources are orchestrated to appear as if they are the by-product of a single progressive design.

This way of looking at the city grid started at the peak of colonial Melbourne in 1885 and disappeared with the demise of the cable system in 1939. In this period Melbourne, the new capital of the Australian Federation since 1901, was influenced by the ideas of the 'City Beautiful' and 'Garden City' movements. The ideas were mostly cosmetic and changed the look of the capital city more than its actual urban design. Trees were planted, streets turned into boulevards, and the city as filmed and promoted became more and more bucolic after 1910.

The film turns what is ordinary about the city into something extraordinary. In Melbourne's cinematic history the urban spectacle is curious, as the city's ordered grid seems to prefer the non-theatrical to the spectacular, the private to the public. Melbourne, in particular, has a tradition of lacking an iconic presence in film. The cinematic history of the city has shown a resistance to moving the camera along the perspectives of the grid, preferring less spectacular static shots or altogether avoiding the idea of the city as a main character. Absent from fiction films until the late 1950s, the image of the city has been characterised in news and documentaries as lacking in iconic views, perhaps responding

to a resistance to the urban spectacle which was already encoded in its pragmatic urban design.

Melbourne was founded in 1835 and planned around a grid-iron urban nucleus without squares. The orthogonal crossing of streets produces a repetitive visual pattern characterised by narrow perspectival views and distant vanishing points. In the light of this un-theatrical tradition the enhanced experience of the city presented in *Marvellous Melbourne* is unusual and unfamiliar. The immersive city-view of the tram sequence, today more frequently available in museums and *médiathèques*, appears to recall, therefore, an improbable visual past, a memory never really lived. Even the unrestored, fragmented and incomplete way in which the sequence is presented to the contemporary audience betrays a relationship which seems not unproblematic.

The film is not commercially available, and does not exist in a restored version, nor is it easy to access in high resolution. Of the many versions none seems able to bring back the effect of the early screening with live audio. An early incomplete VHS release (1988) has been discontinued. The recently instituted Melbourne Museum exhibits, out of context, a fragmented version of the sequence to introduce the Colonial section of the exhibition. An unrestored full version is available today online in low resolution from *Archive.org* and *Youtube*, a cinematic ghost with added sound. Only the one-off silent screening in a sold-out programme at the 2011 Melbourne Film Festival seemed to come close to the uncanny movement of the original - the spectacle of a city photographed in a movement which seems to contradict the privacy of its character.

On one level, then, the core scene of the film, its phantom ride, generates a spectacular hyper-realism which constructs an over-familiar Melbourne within an unfamiliar condition of spectatorship, still the same city but mediated through a fixed mechanical eye attached to the city grid. On another conceptual level, the tram-driven view engages with the industrial urban subtext and returns colonial memories removed by the then new policies of the 'City Beautiful' movement. Both levels contribute to produce a spectacle which actively works against the core organising principles of the city's founding urban design.

Notes and References

[1] 'The Vision', *Sunday Times* (Perth), 29 January 1911, p. 6.

[2] Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XVII (1917-1919): *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, London: Vintage, p. 248.

[3] The film's credits state "*Cinematographed by C. Spencer*", but in fact it was most likely shot by Ernst Higgins, who was the main operator for Spencer Pictures in that period. The quotations are from *The Age*, Tuesday 22 November 1910, p. 12. For the production context see Stephen Gaunson, 'Marvellous Melbourne: Lady Filmgoers, Spencer's Pictures and Cozens Spencer', *Early Popular Visual Culture,* vol. 12 no. 1, 2014, pp. 22-36.

[4] Tom Gunning, 'Camera Movement', in Richard Abel (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema*. London: Routledge. 2010, pp. 92-5.

[5] Raymond Fielding, 'Hale's Tours: Ultrarealism in the Pre-1910 Motion Picture', *Cinema Journal,* vol. 10 no. 1, Fall 1970, p. 39.

[6] Lauren Rabinovitz, *For the Love of Pleasure: Women, Movies, and Culture in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago,* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998, p. 147.

[7] Giuliana Bruno, 'Motion and Emotion: Film and the Urban Fabric', In Andrew Webber and Emma Wilson (eds.), *Cities in Transition: The Moving Image and the Modern Metropolis*, London: Wallflower Press, 2008, p. 21.

[8] Freud, 'The Uncanny', pp. 245-6.

[9] See Mike Lewis, *Melbourne: The City's History and Development,* Melbourne: City of Melbourne, 2nd. ed., 1995.